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## The Temporality of Multilateralism

The discourse on forms of multilateral action cannot do without a temporal reference. In this context, the consequence of a – widely assumed – changing world seems to be adaptation. In the EU context, this aspect is understood as a “Darwinian moment”. Related temporal aspects clash like urgency and sustainability, forward-looking and backward-looking anachronisms, re-activity and pro-activity as well as subjective perceptions and objective time measurement. Thinking about multilateralism is thus only possible with and under temporal considerations.

„Our world is changing at an unprecedented *pace*“ states [Heiko Maas](#) in his foreword to the German government’s recently published *White Paper on Multilateralism* while speaking of the „conviction that compromise, balance, and an orientation toward the global good brings better results for all *in the long run*.“ [Angela Merkel](#) points out the time aspect of international cooperation and international problem-solving in the face of „systemic competition“ when she states that we need to be „more innovative and productive than other parts of the world, and in many ways, we also need to become *faster*.“ [Joe Biden](#) expresses similar thoughts during his first speech to the U.S. Congress when he emphasizes that, “autocrats [...] think that democracy can’t compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with autocracies because it takes too long to get consensus”. Reading these recent quotes, one cannot help but perceive temporal tensions and ask the question: How does time affect multilateralism?

### The „Darwinian Moment“

The current discourse on forms of multilateral action apparently cannot do without reference to a temporal component. The consequence of a changing world seems to be adaptation. Thinking about the adaptation of living beings to a changing environment means standing in the tradition of Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882). This idea is explicitly taken up in an Ideas Paper of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) by [Elena Lazarou](#) and in an article by [Sandro Gozi](#), a Member of the European Parliament. Both speak of a “Darwinian moment” for multilateralism and

the EU. A central assumption is that “multilateralism needs to be fit for purpose, in order to survive” (Lazarou 2020). Interestingly, the authors refer to the “Darwinian moment” now, of all times. In a time of a natural-biological challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for international cooperation is embedded in this very context and the “biological” awareness for comprehensive adaptation to the new circumstances is used for the political field of international politics. In short: Biological adaptation is translated to a call for multilateral adaptation.

### **Challenges of our Time**

Acclimatization to environmental changes corresponds to coping with (new) problems: Adaptation strategies are (co)determined by the finding, invention, perception, and description of problems ([Hellmann 2017](#), [Herborth 2017](#)). These processes always have temporal dimensions. Maas, Merkel, and Biden, by emphasizing the temporal component, add it to the search for the semantics of social structures that are set in motion by increased complexity, as addressed by [Daniel Jacobi](#).

The temporal component also plays an important role because we currently have the feeling that we live in a rapidly changing world. This perception is caused, among other things, by an increasing interconnectedness as a result of globalization, new technologies, and transnational threats and uncertainties. Increased complexity and a „downsizing“ of the world go hand in hand. In this complex world order a state is no longer in a position to merely govern itself; agreements, joint strategies, and cooperation are more important than ever. This feeling not only applies to major global changes but also takes place in our everyday life. Thus, in a double sense, a new zeitgeist seems to be entering the world and day-to-day life. A new sensitivity to time and urgency is evident. One example is the climatic tipping points and political promises of climate neutrality in 10+ year increments. This long-term perspective is contrasted by civil society initiatives that provide weekly reminders of the issue. The pandemic, on the other hand, orders everyday life into shorter and shorter periods – 14-day quarantine, 7-day incidences, 24-hour test validity. Digitalization creates updates every second and (demands) constant accessibility.

Observable here is an inevitable temporal discrepancy between change and adaptation. A constant „lagging“ of politics is the rule since politics can usually react

to emerging problems only with a time lag. This can be seen in four major challenges of our time – the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing socioeconomic inequality, and the uncertainties in new civil and military arenas (for example cyberspace, outer space, or the Arctic) – each of which brings its own time dimension. Roughly outlined, it can be said that the climate crisis is slow and protracted. Socio-economic inequality behaves similarly. Both are also similar in the fact that they have been postponed so far and politics and society are now under pressure to act. The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly emerging and, at least in its current intensity (and compared to the other three challenges), a rather short-lived but potentially recurring phenomenon. New military arenas are fast-emerging challenges that initiate new races as they are developed and appear long-lived in the face of (continuing) technological advances but require rapid remediation of these due to the emergence of ever-new security vulnerabilities. In addition, these problems show themselves to be comprehensive, uncertain, and relatively intangible in daily life, which requires intensive and difficult debates. This fits [Schimank's \(2011\)](#): „design paradox“. He argues: „Complexity beats rationality, and as a result, the design capacity of policymakers notoriously falls short of the actual design need.“ The search is on for quick and sustainable solutions to pressing multilateral problems. However, the complexity of multilateral problem-solving makes it difficult and protracted.

### **Adjustments and Negotiations**

Unceasing challenges must be squared with constant development. The problems are met, among other things, with cooperation, strengthened and evolving institutions, innovation, and social learning processes ([Chan 2015](#)). Here, too, a temporal aspect always resonates, since all four examples mentioned require negotiation – that is, negotiation with others, with what has been before, or with oneself. Such negotiations, unsurprisingly, do not seem to come easily. Nevertheless, well-thought-out strategies based on convictions and intense consultations are – according to the (democratic) [premise](#) – longer-lasting (than “quick” solution). So, in the end, they save future time.

The focus on negotiations also reveals a systemic component when one looks at its underlying legitimacy. Crucial differences between democracies and autocracies become apparent. In addition to consensus-building at the international level,

democracies must engage in national, intra-democratic conversations. These are inevitably divided into short periods by regular elections and are thus not geared to finding long-term solutions. This vertical communication can be comparatively neglected by autocracies – due to different legitimacy structures. Democracies are therefore more strongly linked to societal changes, which require them to adapt continuously. They face the challenge of the double consensus-building process: on the one hand, internally, and, on the other, internationally (Putnam 1988).

The internal-democratic conversation, the communication between governments and (their) societies, is becoming increasingly difficult. The flow of communication has changed: While it used to be comparatively structured and transparent, filtered through television, newspaper, or radio newsrooms, the emergence of „partial publics“ can now be observed. This may also be highlighted as a result of social media. Information no longer gets through to everyone and, especially in the case of emotional topics, partial publics make it possible for opinions to be confirmed unquestioningly by the respective specific bubble. Autocracies have identified precisely this inner-democratic conversation as a weak point: Russia in particular has distinguished itself through targeted disinformation campaigns, especially in the course of elections. Biden’s quote should also be interpreted in this sense: Autocrats assume that the additional intra-democratic talk is a decisive – also temporal – disadvantage for democracies. The negotiation process between democracies and autocracies takes place in different time dimensions and thus shapes the work of international organizations – one reason why problems with consensus, blockades, and delays occur.

### **Time Dimensions of Multilateralism**

Two terms prominently featured in the recent *White Paper on Multilateralism* emerge in the context of „anticipatory multilateralism“ and “resilience”. Both refer to the time dimension *before* and *with* the problem: early recognition or anticipation of emerging problems and building resilience and evolving with the problem. While “resilience” addresses primarily the civil society level, “anticipatory multilateralism” refers to international politics. The idea is to develop a strategy *in advance* of the event to increase the speed of response. On the time axis, this would mean becoming „future-ready“ in the present. But are (international) politics really up for this? With the current mounting problems, can governments act with foresight and do this without

being tempted to succumb to seemingly “easy” solutions?

Necessarily, such multilateralism must be based on expertise and knowledge ([Corke 2020](#)). Analysis of the past alone is not enough though. This can only be the first step because concrete results must serve as lessons for the future. At the same time, they need to be implemented institutionally so that they are not just good ideas but effective mechanisms for future challenges that can be put into action quickly as soon as needed. In other words, one has to prepare adaptation structures so they are not being designed at the moment of a challenge but are capable of being implemented right away. But [prevention has its time](#), too. The benefits of prevention are not (directly) visible. Not all preventative measures can be justified at any point in time (keyword: [prevention paradox](#)) – So “[t]here is glory” as well as “[no glory in prevention!](#)”

*Forward-looking* and *backward-looking* anachronisms meet in the present. In this „time-dimension-chaos“ multilateralism then gets – as to be seen in the [White Paper](#) – the three adjectives “active” (present), “more effective” (concerning the past), and “sustainable” (perspective view into the future) attached to it. So, the realization of which three characteristics should be used to move forward is already there; consistent implementation, the actual carrying out, lags. It remains open whether the proposed adjective „active“ would have to be supplemented with the prefix “re” or “pro”. Does one act in the present exclusively reactive or can the present be shaped proactively? [Maas](#) divides (German) foreign policy into (pro)active and reactive action. (Pro)active foreign policy would correspond to medium- and long-term planning and goals (based on values and interests). Urgent crisis and challenges, however, require a reactive foreign policy.

### **„Darwinian Moment” as a Valid Description?**

If one now traces all these considerations back to the “Darwinian moment”, a critical statement of this description is required. In clear distinction to a Darwinian understanding of the “survival of the fittest” as power politics, the description is helpful as it focuses on the need for adaptation ([Gozi 2021](#)). The distinctive dynamics of the world order when dealing with challenges is equated with the term evolution, which implies that features change over time. Multilateral adaptations are not subject to linear trajectories ([Preuss 1994](#)). The course of change and adaptation is

not predictable; rather, the social is “vague and indeterminate” ([Laux 2013](#)). In these respects, the transfer of the concept to the multilateral situation works because it is not possible to work with clear causalities (Preuss 1996<sup>i</sup>). This lack of the latter makes it impossible for multilateralism – as for evolution – to have a secure foresight.

The description as a moment seems paradoxically chosen for the process of adaptation, since “moment” refers to something singular, but Darwin observed something process-like. However, it simultaneously highlights the ambivalence of the idea of adaptation: Following the introductory quotes, it expresses, on the one hand, the urgency of adaptation – perceived as critical right now – while emphasizing, on the other hand, the need for long-term solutions. This description thus draws attention to the temporal dimensions of processes and clarifies the understanding of multilateral adaptation as an accessible allegory: the abstractness decreases despite increasing complexity with the description as a “Darwinian moment”. The representation of adaptation or change as something “natural” could also be associated with the desire to reduce (future) fears.

Biological adaptation proceeds comparatively slow – taking place over many generations – but is „effective“. Multilateral adaptation, in the figurative sense, would have to take place quickly, it is claimed. To cope with major challenges adaptation must be permanent. Results must not be delayed for generations. The accusation of the „slowness“ of multilateral structures thus resembles the protracted biological processes. If one considers the supposed „[crisis of multilateralism](#)“ the aspect of (lacking) sustainability also comes to the fore. Inherent in this description of a „crisis of multilateralism“ is the idea of an „institutional Darwinism“ ([Pempel 2010](#)). This implies that only those institutions “survive” that can skillfully adapt to the changing environment. But, for example, the concept fails to grasp the existing and changing power relations that contribute to the UN Security Council which is anything but adapted to today’s global order, nevertheless continues to survive.

Adaptation is to be distinguished between „actively adapting“ and „passively being adapted“. In Darwinian biology, organisms adapt passively through natural selection. Political institutions are subject to the necessity of conscious action – that is, the active adaptation. A theory disproved in biology – Lamarck’s theory of active adaptation of living things to their external environment ([Gilday, Hoffmann 2013](#)) – seems to work better in the political field. It would therefore be more appropriate –

but not quite as well-known as Darwin's theory and thus certainly less illustrative – to speak of a “Lamarckian moment” in the field of International Relations instead of a “Darwinian moment”. In Lamarck's „active adaptation“, re-activity and pro-activity could be united, as it encompasses both a reaction to the environment and the experiential self and the proactive shaping of one's future. Thus, due to the simultaneity in action, it is not possible to distinguish between re- and proactive action (contrary to Maas' classification above), which shows an inescapable connection between past, present, and future.

Overall, it can be stated that the „time of multilateralism“ is multidimensional. It encompasses the dynamics, context, and timelessness of multilateralism and thus allows for engaging with and in different dimensions. In addition, we conceptualize time as an objective measurement of time and as a subjective sense and perception of time that (co)determines urgencies and the need for action. This fits with [Reckwitz](#)'s argument that time per se does not exist, but only “temporalities”. Whether as a moment, section, period, process, timeline – our world is structured in “temporalities”. (Re-)thinking multilateralism is only possible from a perspective and only with and under temporal considerations.

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<sup>i</sup> Ulrich K. Preuß: *Risikovorvorsorge als Staatsaufgabe. Die epistemologischen Voraussetzungen von Sicherheit*, in: Dieter Grimm: *Staatsaufgaben (unter Mitarb. v. Evelyn Hagenah)*, Baden-Baden 1994, S. 523–551